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# Jerri McTaggart—Creating educational opportunities

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## Creating Educational Opportunities

As a single mother, Jerri McTaggart pushed through 72 hours per week at her job, studying at nights to obtain her Master's degree in environmental policies. Needless to say, she had plenty of courage.

So when she was frustrated that employees at LANL's Carlsbad office couldn't participate in the Lab's volunteer programs, and the students in that southern part of the state were ineligible to receive scholarships provided through the Lab's Employee Scholarship Fund, she decided to do something about it.

Determined, she cleverly found a way to get an audience with the Lab's director and deputy, bidding on and winning a lunch with the two powerful men, at which she convinced them to change policies. They were impressed.

McTaggart then negotiated with Lab management to set up a scholarship fund, and she started fundraising. In just a few years, her efforts led to the fourth math and science scholarship awarded from this fund to students near Carlsbad, and she also launched an additional scholarship that supports military veterans' children.

## **A rocky road to success**

Although she had a science undergraduate degree, she couldn't solely support her children in the late 1970s on the low salary such a degree afforded at the time, so she left research and took a job at Colorado's Rocky Flats nuclear plant for nearly 20 years.

Now a scientist at the Los Alamos office in Carlsbad, she helps small-quantity transuranic waste generators identify and solve problems.

McTaggart loves working on projects that improve job safety and production, generating new standards such as improved glovebox materials to work more safely with hazardous elements, and, in one example, reducing project costs by \$18 million.

Now a grandmother and a recipient of one of the Lab's 2014 Women Who Inspire awards, she believes you're never too old to get a degree and she is considering pursuing a doctorate in nuclear forensic science.

McTaggart strongly recommends that young women consider careers in engineering or homeland security, growing fields that she says need more women. Most importantly, she advises, don't get sidetracked by life: make a college degree a priority.

## **Fearlessly helping others**

She is one of the Lab's top volunteers, logging more than 1,275 volunteer hours last year for more than a dozen nonprofit organizations.

In fact, McTaggart nearly missed a recent ceremony honoring her efforts, because she and her husband were in the middle of the devastating Oklahoma tornadoes, delivering much-needed supplies to families and the animal shelters—and speaking of shelters, she has saved more than 80 dogs from being euthanized.

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